

---

# **Producing Powerful Collaboratives: Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups**

2nd Annual Learning Symposium  
College of Alberta School Superintendents

Edmonton, AB  
March 15, 2012

**Laura Lipton, Ed.D**

Co-director  
MiraVia, LLC [www.miravia.com](http://www.miravia.com)

---

# Producing Powerful Collaboratives: Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

*Laura Lipton, Co-Director; MiraVia, LLC*

**P**ARTNERSHIPS that are able to take collective action engage in rich collaboration about important issues. These groups share leadership, educators and community members working together to improve conditions within and outside of schools. This strong teamwork results in services for children and families that remove learning barriers and promote success for all.

The following seven qualities describe these high performing groups. A group is not a static thing. Groups develop, shaped by their continued shared experiences and the processing of these experiences. When and how group members choose to participate emerges from individual and collective awareness and commitment to developing these attributes.

## Seven Qualities of High Performing Groups

- Maintain a clear focus
- Embrace a spirit of inquiry
- Put data at the center
- Honor commitments
- Cultivate relational trust
- Seek equity
- Assume collective responsibility

### Maintain a clear focus

High performing groups clarify desired results and define success criteria. Less productive groups meander from topic to topic, often within overcrowded agendas. Such groups use a scatter shot approach, in which all items are treated with equal importance. High performing groups agree on and protect priorities for the group and the work at hand, preserving precious time for focused engagement about the things that matter.

By establishing clear and measurable goals and using success criteria to determine progress, these groups can work in the present while holding longer-term visions for improvement. These groups are willing to sustain focus for extended periods of time, not just rush for the quick fix. For example, targeting drop out rates, and reducing risk factors, such as substance abuse, delinquency or violence requires significant attention and innovation in intervention plans. The results of these changes for large cohorts of students may not appear in the short term, but will increase over time with ongoing monitoring and adjustments informed by data-driven conversations.

High performing groups manage and minimize distractions. Agreed upon structures and signals help with “digression management”, particularly when time is short, energy is low and tasks are demanding. For example, prioritized and time-coded public agendas, based on agreed upon outcomes, with time monitoring, and shorthand language, such as “birdwalk alert” with permission to use it when digressions occur. In

these groups, members self-monitor, paying attention to themselves and each other, to gauge whether their contributions add to or detract from the group's focus. There is an agreement that maintaining focus is more important than any individual's desire to share an anecdote or elaboration.

***Are your group's mission and goals clear to all?***

***What are some things that keep your group focused?***

***What are some ways you handle distractions?***

## Embrace a spirit of inquiry

By definition, inquiry is when you do not have a preferred response, or already know the answer. High performing groups ask genuine questions about their own processes and practices, as well as the issues they are exploring. They inquire. These groups often develop novel solutions to complex problems. Less productive groups avoid ambiguity, uncertainty and challenging questions, wrapping themselves in and drawing upon the comfort of their existing knowledge base and pushing for quick fixes.

High performing groups are both problem seekers and problem solvers. These groups seek external resources and data outside their own experience. Such groups consider an "and/both" approach, not "right/wrong" or "either/or" responses, skillfully engaging in conflict with ideas, not with one another. They inquire into data to identify, clarify and define the problem, seeking patterns and root causes before pursuing solutions and planning actions.

In these groups, members are willing to suspend their own judgments and opinions as they consider other perspectives. They are willing to delay jumping to solution. They push past surface ideas and avoid the comfort of quick conclusions, seeking external resources to extend their own knowledge base.

***Discuss some of your group's target goals. Generate some "what if's", "why not's" and other novel questions that might support your work.***

## Put data at the center

High performing groups use data to inform and guide group work. These data focus and calibrate conversations. Less productive groups blur fact and opinion, occupying time with anecdote and argument. High performing groups tap multiple types and multiple sources of data to move their work forward. These groups keep data central to the conversation and make sure the data are available, visible and understood by everyone. They make data-driven decisions to determine target area, research interventions, and track and measure success.

For example, a partnership might target a specific area of well-being for students, such as academic achievement, bullying, obesity, nutrition, or substance abuse. In addition to information on academic performance, systematic examination of data, collected through public forums, surveys, additional school and community statistics and so on, provide measureable methods for revealing a fuller picture and determining project success.

By exploring both formative and summative sources and using shared protocols and structures, these groups are able to depersonalize the data and use them as a catalyst for critical conversations about progress towards desired goals. With skillful inquiry and balanced participation they delve beneath the surface features of the data, persevering in the quest for deeper understandings.

***What are some data sources tapped by your group?***

***How is data used to inform your progress – from goal setting, to progress monitoring to summative evaluation?***

## Honor commitments

High performing groups make their goals the focus of their conversations. They see themselves and all members as learners, and are willing to consider the limits of their own knowledge. Individual agendas are melded into the group's agreed upon agenda.

This essential disposition energizes the learning potential within the group, and extends to success for all students. Less productive groups have members that hold on to their own positions, often expounding on the virtues of their own perspectives, rather than consider the ideas of others.

High performing groups keep their focus on what is good for students, not just convenient for themselves. They are committed to supporting students inside and outside of schools. All members do more than volunteer – they are willing to lead initiatives, not just participate. They explore the process, performance and products of learning. They also assess and monitor their own learning, reflecting on their processes and products, and setting goals for continuous improvement.

***What is most important to your group? How are the priorities selected and maintained?***

## Cultivate relational trust

High performing groups operate with high expectations and positive intentions as central assumptions. Within these groups, it is safe to display both high competence and vulnerability. In less productive groups, members fear attack or reprisal for things they might do or say, and are filled with doubt; having little or no faith that their colleagues will honor decisions or follow through on agreements. High performing groups rely on the integrity and competence of their members inside and outside of the meeting room. When it is safe not to know, team members don't feel the need to hide their shortcomings. They can count upon fellow group members' reliable and consistent application of agreements to the group process and to the work at hand.

In these groups, members say what they'll do and do what they said. They assume positive intentionality and believe in the good will of their colleagues. They understand the difference between a question and a critique. For this reason they are willing to be vulnerable and disclose both their successes and shortcomings, knowing that this information will not be exploited or belittled. They hold high expectations for themselves and each other and have faith that those expectations will be met and even exceeded.

***On a scale of 1 to 10 (one is low), how would you rate relational trust in your group?***

***If you are 5 or greater: What are some things you do to build and sustain trust?***

***If you are 5 or less: What might you do to build and sustain trust?***

## Seek equity

High performing groups intentionally seek to balance participation. They are sensitive to perceived disparity between roles, experience, titles, etc. On this level playing field, they seek a diverse blend of voices and protect space for all to contribute. These groups seek external resources and recruit perspectives that might not be represented within the group. They reach out to multiple constituents. Less productive groups limit participation, allow dominance and restrict divergent thought, sealing themselves in the protection of their own logic.

High performing groups ensure reciprocity, foster interdependence and engage in productive collaboration. They apply structures to ensure that everyone has equal voice in the conversation as all strive for shared understanding. For example, creating smaller task groups that focus on large, shared

data displays, using round-robin protocols to balance participation and publicly charting so ideas belong to everyone provides equity of opportunity to join the conversation.

These groups operate from the assumption that everyone has something to offer. They seek to protect the minority voice. They monitor their own level of participation to be sure they are not dominating the conversation and make sure to encourage participation, especially from those who have not yet shared.

***How balanced are your groups? (not very, somewhat, completely)***

***What voices are represented? What other resources might be important to recruit?***

### Assume collective responsibility

High performing groups make and honor agreements about who they want to be as a group and what they want to produce for the students and their families. They make data-driven choices and are willing to be answerable for those choices. This collective efficacy, or the shared belief that together the group will successfully achieve its goals, is a prime resource for sustained improvements in student learning. In less productive groups, members are protective of their autonomy in the meeting room and in the classroom. They are unwilling to see others' work as part of their own. They don't believe that group members' have the capability and willingness to make a difference.

Groups with high degrees of collective responsibility pursue challenging goals, exert concentrated effort and persist in collective action leading to improved success. In these groups, members believe in the power of the group to make a difference. They all take responsibility for fundraising, volunteerism, and for expressing a unified message. They recognize that their individual choices, both in the meeting room and outside of it, affect everyone. Thus, they willingly invest their time and energy, setting aside personal agendas to support the group's work and its development.

***Share some aspect of your group work that requires and engages ALL members.***